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ABSTRACT

This working paper examines the meaning of leadership within the context of early childhood education, including the nuances of meaning clinging to the concept from other contexts. The paper begins with a discussion of the denotation of leadership as indicated in the "American Heritage Dictionary": (1) the position or office of a leader; (2) capacity or ability to lead [competencies]; (3) a group of leaders; and (4) guidance, direction. It also considers the definition of a leader, and maintains that there is widespread ambivalence about authority in the field of early childhood education and that many professionals reject concepts of authority in defining leadership out of a commitment to equity. The paper notes that one of the definitions of the verb "to lead" relates to dance and raises a leadership image for further consideration, with leaders and followers moving together toward the future. The paper differentiates transformational and transactional leaders and notes the need for different types of leadership for various purposes or endeavors by organizations. Last, it discusses current knowledge regarding the competencies needed by leaders, including issues related to the knowledge base, competencies, accepting a challenge, and access to leadership roles. (KB)

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Taking The Lead

Investing in Early Childhood Leadership
for the 21st Century

Sheri Azer

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What is Leadership? 2B
Walking Around a Definition

by
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Introduction

As *Taking the Lead: Investing in Early Childhood Leadership for the 21st Century* begins its work on a leadership initiative, we want to identify the dimensions of the question of what leadership is, including the nuances and the scraps of meaning that cling to the concept of leadership from other contexts. We want to ask our friends in the field, "Does the term include this idea or not?" and "What does the word leadership mean to you?" We want to encourage a broad range of perspectives on the topic to enlighten our work. This working paper is a first effort to take a walk all around the various uses of the word "leadership," to raise questions about what it means and doesn't mean, and to invite others to share their meaning-making with us at The Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education at Wheelock College.

What is Leadership?

A word is the way it is used, its context, the meanings it evokes, the feelings it connotes. We start with a dictionary, knowing that we want to get to more examples than a dictionary can offer. According to the American Heritage Dictionary, leadership is: (l) the position or office of a leader; (2) capacity or ability to lead [competencies]; (3) a group of leaders; and (4) guidance, direction.

Already, this simple definition raises issues for our field. ***Meaning #1*** speaks of the position or office of a leader and implies that some roles carry with them an expectation of leadership. The early childhood field has been heavily influenced by the notion of one professional role – that of teacher – rather than a differentiation of roles. One of the effects of this singular emphasis has been that the need for director training has been overlooked. A second effect, and one that is important to consider as we walk around the definition of leadership, is that in focusing on the role of teacher many people do not consider that the roles of teacher aide and teacher assistant are also part of our profession.

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Although the role of teacher has been viewed as the core of the profession, it has not been traditionally considered a leadership position in the field. Viewed in this historical context, ***Meaning #1***, or any definition that seeks to identify leaders by the position or office they hold, excludes teachers from the ranks of leadership. This is equally true for teacher aides and teacher assistants; if these individuals' roles are not even recognized as part of the profession by many members of our field, let alone perceived as holding "positions or offices of leader," ***Meaning #1*** rules them out of eligibility for leadership. When one considers that these roles in our field are likely to be filled by people of color (National Black Child Development Institute, 1993), ***Meaning #1*** raises the issue of access to leadership. This issue is further discussed below, under the heading "Access to Leadership Roles."

Meaning #2 speaks of the capacity or ability to lead and makes an assumption that the competency identification for a field like ours must include certain competencies related to leading. The definition does not identify what that capacity or ability involves, raising a question whether we will need to identify leadership competencies before we can agree on a definition of leadership. If so, the task is formidable and the literature is vast. This issue is further discussed on page four, under the heading of "Competencies."

Meaning #3 speaks of "leadership" as a group of leaders, assuming some interconnected set of individuals who constitute the leadership of an endeavor, an organization, or a field. That meaning evokes an image of shared leadership, an attractive one for our field. It also opens up a possible diversity, with different individuals bringing different competencies and values to the whole, rather than an identified model of leadership applied like a template to each individual single heroic leader. Most of the literature today points to examples of shared leadership as a key to success, and, since that model is comfortable for our field, a central theme in our leadership development may turn out to be shared leadership.

Meaning #4 refers us to guidance or direction. Leadership means going intentionally in certain directions. This meaning assumes the presence of leaders to give that guidance or direction. Since ***Meaning #4*** implies the presence of a leader, it points us to dictionary definitions of a leader.

As we stroll onwards to explore the meaning of the word leader, we may reflect upon which meanings of the word leadership seem to be most suited to the values of our field. When we think of stories of individuals who assume leadership, they include large numbers of community members who made something happen, regardless of their work role. It may be important, therefore, to remember that connecting leadership with a role is only one meaning of the word. ***Meanings #2, #3,*** and ***#4*** all keep the doors to leadership open to individuals regardless of their roles.

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What is a "Leader?"

The American Heritage Dictionary defines the word "leader" in several ways, raising issues of authority. The major definitions are: (1) one that leads or guides; (2) one who is in charge or in command of others; (3a) one who heads a political party or organization; (3b) one who has influence or power, especially of a political nature; and (4) a conductor, especially of a band, an orchestra, or a choral group. (Other meanings have developed from specialized conditions in music, printing, domestic animals, fishing, plumbing, film-making, economics.)

Some of us will accept the notion of ***Meaning #1*** and the word "guides" while rejecting other definitions with assumptions of "in charge" or "in command," "heading" an organization, and "influence and power." There is widespread ambivalence about authority in our field, despite a yearning for professional recognition, a form of authority. Many of us will reject any concepts of authority in defining leadership out of a commitment to equity.

Without question,we need to be sure that our field builds a system with equity of opportunity, so that roles of influence, status, and reasonable compensation are accessible to everyone with comparable qualifications, with frequent opportunity for advancement through training. However, does the word authority need to carry the negative connotations it currently bears in our field? Professional preparation may not have prepared us to think deeply about the meaning and uses of authority – and the differences between the words authoritarian and authoritative – and the field may wish to revisit and "walk around" these definitions at some point.

What Does it Mean to "Lead?"

In the American Heritage Dictionary, the word "lead" has a large number of meanings, some as a verb and some as a noun, with submeanings for most of them. Since there may be connotations to the word that gather from these diverse meanings, we scanned those that seem relevant to our purposes and found: (1) show the way by going in advance; (2) guide or direct in a course; (3) to serve as a route, channel, or conduit for; (4) guide the behavior of or the opinion of; (5) direct the performance of activities (as in music and military); inspire the conduct of; (6) play a principal or guiding role in; (7) to go or be ahead of; (8) to be foremost among; (9) to pass or go through; (10) to guide a partner in dancing; (11) to act as commandeer, director, or guide; to tend toward a certain goal; to make the initial play. (There are also a wide range of specialized meanings, such as in baseball.)

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The dictionary gives an example of the word "lead" in connection with ballroom dancing, where one partner leads and the other follows. The metaphor of the dance is also used in our field to describe the ways in which an infant and a caregiver or parent interact responsively. In that example, it is hard to distinguish who leads and who follows. It raises a leadership image for further thought, as leaders and followers inextricably move together toward the future.

These meanings for "lead" raise the same issues of authority, role, and equity to be resolved. These dictionary definitions embody some of the issues in our field that surround the topic of leadership. As a field, we may lack clarity about authority and roles, we may lack agreement on identifying special competencies which leaders should have in our field, we may have ambivalence toward leadership, and we may be inattentive to issues of followership.

Transformational and Transactional Leaders

Many of those who write about leadership make a distinction between transformational and transactional leaders. Some leaders (called transformational leaders) influence and inspire others. Others (called transactional leaders or managers) lead by employing the skills necessary to get the job done.

Transformational leaders are described as pathfinders who have in common a caring, respectful and responsible attitude; believe in people and are flexible about people and structure; use a participatory approach; are willing to share power; and are driven by mission. Transactional leaders are able to facilitate the development of a mutually supportive community through a focus on the process rather than the product. Transactional leaders call forth great patience and caring in relationships. They are described as value-driven and persuasive, and they use anecdotal communication, are strong, predictable, and essential to team building.

Most of the literature assumes that both these forms of leadership are needed at the same or different times for various purposes by organizations or endeavors. For instance, team members require more transactional leadership during the early stages of group life (and low levels of follower-readiness) in order to build team commitment. In the advanced stages of group development and readiness, more transformational leadership is required to bring about achievement, pride, recognition, and satisfaction.

Transformational and transactional leaders are not necessarily different individuals; the same person can acquire both sets of competencies and will probably need both at different times. Transactional competencies can be taught. Leaders seldom attribute their transformational competencies to any particular preparation.

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Do We Know the Competencies Needed by Leaders?

Knowledge base: There is fairly clear identification of the "transactional" skills and "transformational" skills useful in particular roles, such as child care director. The "transformational" skills necessary to change the entire United States Army, or create a non-violent movement in the world, are not necessarily prescriptive. There is a wealth of generic literature on these issues in leadership and management to help us as we develop the concepts appropriate for our field. It is impossible to give an adequate overview of this literature, which encompasses leadership concepts applied to fields of education, business, human services, psychology, anthropology, and sociology. Some of this literature is developed to promote various leadership training, provoking the comment from management guru Peter Drucker that "Leadership is hype." There is also a widely read popular literature, part of do-it-yourself self-improvement.

Competencies: One branch of psychology is engaged in a study to identify the competencies that predictably will lead to success in a role and analyze whether some or all of these competencies can be taught. The most recent findings on leadership from this source will be useful and will enlighten our work.

Many of the scholarly works on leadership describe leaders, tell their stories, and derive general concepts of leadership from their lives. This body of work is not greatly different from biographies that leaders themselves write, deriving their own concepts. Most leaders who relate their stories in this manner do not attribute their competencies to any particular training, but ascribe their development more to personal commitments and experiences.

One of the competencies that is frequently identified by some of these leaders is the ability to empower others and help others become leaders. Mentoring may, therefore, be an important aspect of leadership. Another competency that is mentioned is the ability to communicate with people who are different from one's own narrow group.

The leader accepts a challenge: There are frequent uses of phrases that indicate that a leader consciously at times may be called upon to "step up to" a challenge that is not necessarily welcome or comfortable. The challenge may require skills that the leader does not feel s/he possesses and/or may require personal sacrifices. Although we can understand the leader's thought processes, and sympathize with her/his problem, it is possible that this acceptance of a challenge signals growth into a broader domain of influence. Is this acceptance of responsibility part of the connotations of the word "leader?" Is growth into a broader domain of influence a part of the connotation of "leadership" in some cases?

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Access to Leadership Roles

As can be seen from the diverse definitions given above, not all leadership needs to be associated with roles and one can be a leader regardless of role. However, not every role in the early childhood field pays the same, not every role carries the same influence and status, and not every role carries similar responsibility. Some roles are clearly more influential and better rewarded than other roles.

The issue of roles raised in ***Meaning #1*** of leadership has special relevance for people of color, since their access to the better paying jobs in the field – inadequate as such positions are in numbers – is less than that of others. Data indicate that people of color have lower access to college and to roles that require college education (Costley, 1996). The roles where people of color have strong participation are the assisting, supervised roles: assistant teacher, teacher aide, or amongst family child care providers (National Black Child Development Institute, 1993). The roles where they are less represented, in descending order, are teachers, lead teachers, directors, licensors, child care resource and referral specialists, college teachers, researchers, and special education specialists.

Of course, a major issue for our field is the fact that almost all roles are undervalued and underpaid when compared with some other fields. We know we must seek to improve salaries, enhance the status of the profession, and expand the number of roles that offer higher pay and status. While we do that, we must not lose sight of the fact that there is not equal access to opportunities in our field, and we must not forget how much that matters.

Diversity in leadership is an essential ingredient in quality for children. No matter how hard we try, we will not be able to achieve our developmental goals for children if our programs at the same time send them a message that individuals who mirror their families, their communities, their races, their languages, and their cultures are not good enough to be employed in roles of status and influence.

Thinking About Leadership: The Challenge

The literature on leadership is vast, as scientists have studied leadership and leaders have written of their experiences. From all this wealth of literature, leaders have identified and given their opinion about the characteristics of successful leaders. While there is overlap in this content, there are also enough distinctions so that no clear and single picture emerges. Leaders come in many sizes, shapes, dispositions, and competencies. The contexts in which they work and the problems they face also come in different sizes, shapes, and pressures of time and resources.

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As we discovered from our walk around the definition of leadership, the dictionary meanings themselves raise issues for us to confront. We have the opportunity, as we wrestle with these issues and pursue new initiatives in leadership, to think in innovative ways for our field. We need to look forward to the new century and free ourselves to consider out-of-the-box concepts.

With this working paper, we hope to encourage you to engage in your own walk around the definition of leadership. This paper has raised, but not attempted to resolve, several issues. We urge you to consider the questions we are posing in this piece and respond to our thinking. Please give us your thoughts on whether the competencies of leaders are a part of the definition of leadership, your ideas on how it is feasible to identify competencies for major transformational leadership, or, short of that, what approaches to transformational leader competency you believe would be useful to our field. Feel free to write down your comments and ideas, send them to us, and share them with others. Your "walks" around these important concepts will inform the work of *Taking the Lead* and bring us closer to the vision we all have—of a field working more effectively than ever before on behalf of the quality of life for all children and families.

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